The Genesis and Needs of an Ethnic Identity

Keynote Speech given on November 7, 1996, at the Third World Center, Princeton University, Latino Heritage Month Celebration.

Thank you for the gracious introduction. I am delighted to be here tonight, celebrating Latino Heritage Month, the Third World Center's 25th anniversary and Princeton's 250th anniversary. I am also celebrating my 20th year since graduating from Princeton, and it is wonderful to have the opportunity to speak on campus and in a building that contain so many memories for me. Since my graduation, I have had many exciting and challenging experiences, not the least of which has been my appointment to the federal bench. My experiences have taught me much and enriched my life immeasurably. My days at Princeton, however, were the single most transforming experience I have had. It was here that I became truly aware of my Latina identity -- something I had taken for granted during my childhood when I was surrounded by my family and their friends. At Princeton, I began a lifelong commitment to identifying myself as a Latina, taking pride in being Hispanic, and in recognizing my obligation to help my community reach its fullest potential in this society.

In speaking to you tonight, I draw upon my personal experience as a Latina and my knowledge of the special needs of my community. I know, however, that my experience and my community's needs are not unlike those of the many people of color in this room.

As with many people, my identity as a Latina was forged and closely nurtured by my family through our shared traditions. For me, a special part of my being Hispanic are the muchos platos de arroz y guandoles (rice and beans) y de piener (roasted pig) that I have eaten at countless family functions, and the pasteles (boiled root crop paste) I have consumed year after year during the Christmas holidays. My Hispanic identity also includes, because of my adventurous taste buds, morcilla (pig intestines), patitas de cerdo con garbanzos (pig feet and beans), y la lengua y orejas del cuchfrito (pig tongue and ears). It means eating coquitos (coconut ices) y piraguas (shaved ice with tropical colored juices added on) during the summer. It is the sound of merengue at all our family parties and the heart wrenching Spanish love songs that we enjoy. It is the memory of seeing Cantiflas, our famous comic, when I was a kid with my cousins at the Saturday afternoon movies.

My Latina soul was nourished each weekend that I visited and played in abuelita's (grandma's) house. My playmates were my cousins and the children of our extended family that included padrinos y padrinas (godfathers and mothers), suegros y suegras (in-laws), their families and the people who lived next door who came over to play dominoes o la loteria - our bingo - using chick peas as markers on Saturday nights.

Does any one of these things make me a Latina? No, obviously not, because each of our Caribbean and Latin American communities has their own unique foods and different traditions at the holidays. My family in Puerto Rico celebrates Three Kings Day, which my family in New York has not done. I learned about tacos only here at Princeton because of my Mexican first-year college roommate, Dolores Chavez, whom you honored last year. She also introduced me to the beautiful song "La Paloma" that is now popular on the East Coast as well. Being Latina in America also does not mean speaking Spanish. I happen to speak Spanish fairly well, but my brother, only three years younger, like too many of us educated here, barely speaks Spanish. And even those of us who do speak Spanish, speak it poorly.

If I had pursued my career in my undergraduate history mayor, I could likely provide you with a very academic description of what being Latino means. For example, I could define Latinos as those people and cultures populated or colonized by Spain who maintained or adopted Spanish or Spanish Creole as their language of communication. That antiseptic description, however, does not really explain the appeal of morcilla or merengue to an American born child. It does not provide an adequate explanation for why individuals like us, many of us whom were born in this completely different American culture, still identify so strongly with the communities in which our parents were born and raised.

America has a deeply confused image of itself that is a perpetual source of tension. We are a nation that takes pride in our ethnic diversity, recognizing its importance in shaping our society and in adding richness to its existence. Yet, we simultaneously insist that we can and must function and live in a race- and color- blind way that ignores those very differences that in other contexts we laud. That tension between the melting pot and the salad bowl, to borrow recently popular metaphors in New York, is being hotly debated today in national discussions

about affirmative action. This tension leads many of us to struggle with maintaining and promoting our cultural and ethnic identities in a society which is often ambivalent about how to deal with its differences.

In this time of great debate, we must remember that it is not politics or its struggles that creates a Latino or Latina identity. I became a Latina by the way I love and the way I live my life. My family showed me by their example how wonderful and vibrant life is and how wonderful and magical it is to have a Latina soul. They taught me to love America, to value its lesson that great things could be achieved if one works hard for it. Princeton, in turn, showed me that in this society, in order to achieve its promise, it is critical to accept the fact that we people of color are different from the larger society, that we must work harder to overcome the problems our communities face, and that we must work together as people of color to achieve changes.

I underscore that in saying this I am not promoting ethnic segregation. I am promoting just the opposite: an ethnic identity and pride which impels us to work with others in the larger society to achieve advancement for the people of our cultures. You here, like me, who chose to

be educated in a renowned institution like Princeton, have already accepted the principle that we must work together within our society to integrate its established hierarchies and structures if we are to improve our own lives and that of our communities. Nevertheless, although we should not attempt to isolate ourselves from the larger society, we also must steadfastly refuse to lose our unique identities and perspectives in this process.

As I have described for you, I grew up in a very close knit family. My childhood friends were my cousins. The neighborhoods of my childhood were populated largely by Hispanics. Although I had some experiences with discrimination in high school, it was limited, and I was protected by my family and friends in the close cocoon we had around us. When I came to Princeton, however, that cocoon was gone. Princeton was very different from anything I had ever known. How very different I was from many of my classmates came starkly alive here.

I grew up in the inner city. The first week at Princeton I stayed mostly in my room. Dolores, my roommate at the time, usually stayed late at the library, and I would fall asleep before she got home. That entire first week, I heard a cricket sound in my room. I became

obsessed with that sound. Every night, I tore that room apart looking for the cricket. I didn't even know what one looked like except that I had seen Jimmy the Cricket in Pinnochio and figured it had to have long legs. That weekend my then boyfriend and later to be husband, who had grown up in the more country-like Westchester, came for a visit. I told him about the cricket in the room and he roared with laughter. He explained to me that the cricket was outside the room, on the tree whose leaves brushed up against my dorm room window. This was all new to me: we didn't have trees brushing up against windows in the South Bronx or in the projects in which I was raised.

We also didn't know about prep schools then, or take skiing trips, tennis lessons or European vacations in the South Bronx. Except visits to my family in Puerto Rico, I had barely traveled outside the Bronx. I only visited Westchester, which is the first county just north of the Bronx, when I met my intended husband. How different I felt from many of my classmates for whom many of these experiences were very common. The chasm I felt between us seemed and felt enormous.

My very first day signing up for classes, I sat outside the gym next to a woman from Alabama. I remember being intrigued by her very unusual and lovely accent. I began to perceive the depth of our differences when she began to describe her many family members and friends who had attended Princeton. As we sat there, Dolores, my roommate, and Theresa, a friend from Puerto Rico, approached, laughing, and as is sometimes our wont, talking very loudly. At that moment, my Alabamian classmate turned to me and told me, as she looked at the approaching Theresa and Dolores, how wonderful Princeton was that it had all these strange people. How ironic: here I thought she was the strange one.

I spent my summers at Princeton doing things most of my other classmates took for granted. I spent one summer vacation reading children's classics that I had missed in my prior education -- books like Alice in Wonderland, Huckleberry Finn, and Pride and Prejudice. My parents spoke Spanish, they didn't know about these books. I spent two other summers teaching myself anew how to write. I had had enough natural intelligence to get me through my early education but at Princeton I found out that my earlier education was not on par with that of many

of my classmates. When my first mid-term paper came back to me my first semester, I found out that my Latina background had created difficulties in my writing that I needed to overcome. For example, in Spanish, we do not have adjectives. A noun is described with a preposition, a cotton shirt in Spanish is a shirt of cotton, una camisa de agodon, no agondon camisa. Because of this, as with other Latino students, my writing was stilted and overly complicated. My grammar and vocabulary skills were weak. I wrote in my first history paper -- authority of dictatorship, instead of dictatorial authority. I spent a lot of time here filling in the gaps of my earlier education.

At that time in my life, as I was meeting all these new and very different people, reading classics and re-learning writing skills, Princeton was an alien land for me. I felt isolated from all I had ever known, and very unsure about how I would survive here. Accion Puertorriquena, the Puerto Rican group on campus then, and the Third World Center (the building we stand in tonight) provided me with the anchor I needed to ground myself in this new and different world. I met our alumni and upperclass members, like Manny Del Valle and Margarita Rosa who had demonstrated and taken over university buildings in order to push the University to give us the

Third World Center. This very annex, Liberation Hall, was built while I was here from funds they had struggled to get from the University. It was a Chinese friend from high school who was here and the Puerto Rican students who volunteered at the admissions office who recruited me to Princeton. At that time, we had no Puerto Rican or Mexican-American professors or administrators. Frank Reed of the Chicano Organization of Princeton, Charles Hey, another Puerto Rican student, and I, as Co-Chairpersons of Accion Puertorriquena, filed a complaint with the EEOC about Princeton's affirmative action failures. A short time later, Princeton hired its first Hispanic assistant dean of students.

Because of my work with Accion Puertorriquena, the Third World Center, and other activities in which I participated like the University's Discipline Committee, I was awarded the Pyne Prize in my senior year. The kid who didn't know how to write her first semester was honored for academic excellence and commitment to University service in her senior year. When accepting the Prize, I said then, and I repeat today, that it was not I who earned or deserved that prize that day; it was the third world students who preceded me and those with whom I had

worked that had created a place for me at Princeton.

In my years here, Princeton taught me that we people of color could not only survive here, but that we could flourish and succeed. More important, I learned that despite our differences from others at Princeton, we, as people of color with varying ethnic experiences, had become a permanent part of Princeton. It gave much to us, but we gave back to it as well. We brought the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater to Princeton and let our classmates experience its richness. We introduced courses on Puerto Rican and Mexican-American history to the Latin American Department. Princeton changed us, not just academically, but also in what we learned about life and the world. At the same time, we changed this place by our presence here. The Third World Center is just one concrete example among many of how a group of committed students can change a piece of our society in powerful and permanent ways.

Your differences from the larger society and the problems you face don't disappear when you leave Princeton. I can assure you, however, that your experiences here will permit you to more ably deal with those differences in the future. The shock and sense of being an alien will

never again, I suspect, be as profound for you as it has been here. But I know from personal experience that having been educated at Princeton both academically and socially, you are better equipped to address the very significant problems you and our communities face.

Our society has changed tremendously since I was a child. I suspect that many of you here don't even remember or know about the comedian Cantiflas. Cheaper airplane travel, greater public transportation and more cars, along with other demographic factors, have dispersed people of color across greater distances. Growing up, all of my family, except those that remained in Puerto Rico, lived in the Bronx within miles of each other. Because of technological advances, our children will have more opportunities to enjoy—but it will be harder for them to hold on to—their ethnic identities. But hold on to them we must because Latinos and all minority groups, despite what part of the country we live in, face enormous challenges in this society.

The following are statistics that many of you are familiar with but which are always worth repeating and remembering. The numbers are taken from the 1989-90 Census as reported and

analyzed by the National Council of La Raza.

Latinos represents the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. Since 1980, the Latino population has grown about five times as fast as the non-Latino population and Latinos are expected to be the largest ethnic minority in the U.S. in the 21st century. We number about 20.1 million out of 243.7 million Americans, excluding the 3.5 million people of Puerto Rico. We are also a young population, with a median age below African-Americans and other groups. We also have slightly larger families than other ethnic groups. The Hispanic school-age population is, because of our demographics, rapidly growing and although today we account for only 10% of public school enrollment, by the year 2000, we will constitute 1/6 of the students in the nation's classrooms and one-third of the student population overall.

We remain, unfortunately, the most undereducated segment of the U.S. Population. By every statistical measurement, the gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic communities continues to grow at alarming rates. Latinos have the highest school dropout rates of any major ethnic group. About 43% of Hispanics aged nineteen years and over are not enrolled in high

school and have no high school diploma. By age 16-17, almost one in five Hispanics has left school without a diploma, compared to less than one in 16 of African-Americans and one in 15 of Whites. Only 10% of Hispanics over 25 years of age have completed four or more years of college, compared to 11.3% of African-Americans and 20.9% of Whites in the same age group. La Raza notes further that for those students in school, Hispanics share less in gifted programs and have a higher percentage of students held back or not achieving age and grade-level achievement.

Because employment tracks education, we should not be surprised that in income statistics, Latinos are not faring well. Latinos have a much higher unemployment rate than non-Hispanics, 50% over the rate for Non-Hispanics, and 60% above the rates of Whites. We are less likely than non-Hispanics to have managerial and professional jobs. In a comparison none of us likes winning, only African Americans and American Indians do more poorly in gross employment numbers. Latinos, however, have lower per capita incomes than either Whites or African-Americans. In 1988, Hispanics had a per capita income of about $7900, African

Americans of about $8200 and Whites of about $13,900. The New York Times reported in an article published on October 13, 1996, that last year, earnings for all Hispanic groups dropped while income for African-Americans and Whites rose. I note that among Hispanics, La Raza reports Puerto Rican families as faring worst economically, with the lowest family medians and the highest proportion of families with incomes below $10,000. Our poverty rates are highest among female-headed Hispanic families.

As the National Council of La Raza has concluded, in this rapidly evolving technological society, unless we educate our children better and improve their opportunities, our poverty gap with the rest of society will only widen.

These statistics are terribly sobering. We have much to do. That is why Third World centers at institutions like Princeton are so important. Princeton graduates, of any ethnic group, are among the educational elite of our communities. We have a responsibility not only to achieve success individually so that we provide role models and opportunities for others, but we have a responsibility to help change these foreboding numbers. During my Pyne Prize

acceptance speech, I quoted Albert Einstein's ageless words:

> Man is here for the sake of other men. ...
>
> Many times a day I realize how much my own
>
> outer and inner life is built upon the labors
>
> of my fellow men, both living and dead, and
>
> how earnestly I must exert myself in order to
>
> give in return as much as I have received.

It is critical for us in our otherwise busy lives never to forget that we are people of color, of rich cultures, and that we have a responsibility to devote time, when we can, to pro bono work on behalf of our communities, and to give support with money, when we have it, to help our communities face their enormous challenges. I, as many of you, know that studying and training for work is very time consuming. You don't always have time to give to other activities. That is all right. We need to develop our skills. The important thing, however, is not to get lost in studies and personal ambitions but to make sure to take and make time to reach out and

volunteer in our communities throughout our lives. Our ethnic identities give us strength. Take pride in them, take sustenance from them, but give back to our communities as well.

We must ensure that all people of color - not just those of us fortunate enough to be educated at institutions like Princeton - share fully in the American dream. We must keep in sight the overriding reality that whatever our regional, cultural or ethnic differences as people of color, the problems of any of us are the problems of all of us. We need to take advantage of our common bonds and work together to our political, social and economic advantage.

It is wonderful to be able to say Yo tengo orgullo en ser Latina pero tambien entiendo me responsabilidad a mi communidad. Translated: I take pride in being a Latina and I also understand my responsibility to my community. We are fortunate to be a part of a great institution like Princeton. It has a glorious history, and we should take pride in being a part of it. It and its fine reputation will hold you in good stead throughout your lives. My lifetime accomplishments, as yours will be, are in no small measure attributable to my Princeton experience. Nevertheless, for the many reasons I have discussed, we need for you to continue

taking pride in whom you are, where you came from, and always to remember that you must take time to give back to others in your communities some of the benefits that you have received. Good night and thank you again for letting me share this evening with you and giving me this opportunity to reminisce. I look forward to meeting as many of you as I can tonight but I expect that, as your careers develop, our paths will cross again.